

Developing a Children's Environment and Health Strategy for the UK

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Introduction

There are about 14 million children and young people in the UK that represent about 25% of the UK population. Whilst most of these children and young people experience good health, they can be particularly vulnerable to the health impacts arising from exposure to environmental hazards as a result of:

- their growth and developmental immaturity
- experiencing different levels and patterns of exposure to environmental hazards than adults and
- a lack of awareness of the risks posed by environmental hazards

The burden of disease attributable to environmental factors amongst children and young people is difficult to quantify. However, leading causes of mortality and morbidity that may have an environmental component include asthma, neoplasms, injuries, poisonings and intestinal infectious disease.

The World Health Organization (WHO) developed the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe (CEHAPE) to reduce the burden of disease attributable to environmental hazards throughout the WHO European Region (1). All 53 member countries signed the CEHAPE committing them to develop national action plans.

The Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe Priority Areas

- Water, Sanitation and Health
- Accidents, Injuries, Obesity and Physical Activity
- Respiratory Health - Indoor and Outdoor
- Air Pollution
- Chemical, Physical and Biological Hazards

Developing a Children's Environment and Health Strategy (CEHS)

A number of steps have been undertaken in developing the Strategy for the UK including:

- an in-depth assessment of the current status of children's environment and health in the UK (2).
- identifying areas for further consideration to better protect children's health from environmental hazards.
- seeking children's and young people's views on their environment and health priorities.
- developing a draft CEHS for public consultation (3).

The Strategy will provide an overview of the current status and recommendations as to how the UK can further protect and improve children's health by managing environmental influences on health. It will also help to provide an overarching cross government framework for children's environmental health whilst allowing flexibility to take forward recommendations with due consideration being given to existing policies and initiatives.

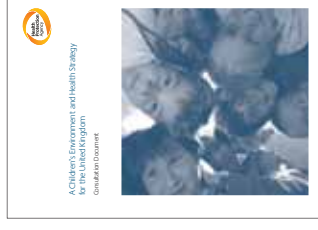
The Consultation Process

A public consultation is currently underway until 13 June 2008. This is seeking feedback from interested parties on the proposed areas for further attention and other areas that may require action in order to meet the UK's commitment to CEHAPE.

The HPA is also hosting several workshops with environmental health professionals and young people to seek feedback and help identify priorities.

Next Steps

- Collate, summarise and publish consultation responses (Autumn 2008)
- Revise and publish a final Strategy for the UK (Autumn 2008).
- Report on progress in meeting the UK's CEHAPE commitments at the next WHO Regional Office for Europe Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health (Italy, 2009).



Examples of areas for further consideration highlighted in the Children's Environment and Health Strategy

- Counteracting the increase in overweight and obesity amongst children and young people and improving the amount of physical activity undertaken
- Addressing concerns about children's asthma being affected by air pollution and the impact of air pollution on lung development.
- Promoting good sun protection behaviour amongst children to prevent skin cancer.
- Reducing unintentional poisonings amongst children.
- Gaining a better understanding of environmental inequalities.
- Improving health surveillance for intestinal infectious disease, injuries and poisonings.

References

- (1) WHO (2004) Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe. Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, Budapest, Hungary, 23-25 June 2004
- (2) HPA (2007) Children's Environment and Health Action Plan. A Summary of Current Activities which Address Children's Environment and Health Issues within the UK. Chilton, UK, Health Protection Agency
- (3) HPA (2008) A Children's Environment and Health Strategy for the United Kingdom. Consultation Document, available March 2008 at: <http://www.hpa.org.uk/cehape>

The HPA would like to thank the Department of Health and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for funding this project and the Interdepartmental Steering Group on Environment and Health for their contribution and feedback. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of any government or devolved administration department or agency

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